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FOR SECRETARY CLINTON FROM CHARGE BUSH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2029

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SUBJECT: YOUR MEETING WITH BELGIAN FOREIGN MINISTER DE GUCHT

Classified By: CDA WAYNE BUSH, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Madame Secretary, your meeting with Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht will reinforce U.S.-Belgian cooperation on Afghanistan, on counter-terrorism, on Iran, and on Africa. Your meeting--our first cabinet-level exchange since a new government was formed under Prime Minister Herman Van Rompuy in December--is an opportunity to recognize Belgium's expanding contributions to ISAF and encourage more military and development assistance for Afghanistan. FM De Gucht is knowledgeable about South and Central Asia, including Iran. He held a wide-ranging discussion of the region with General Petraeus in February. The Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is among Belgium's top foreign policy concerns, and the subject De Gucht is most likely to raise.

¶2. (C) Afghanistan: Belgium's approach to Afghanistan improved significantly after the 2007 elections. De Gucht, a Flemish liberal, has worked with Defense Minister Pieter De Crem to make the case publicly for Belgian involvement in Afghanistan, although privately he harbors strong doubts about the Karzai government. Belgium currently provides four F-16s and support personnel in Kandahar, security forces for the Kabul airport, and a 70-person Operational Mentoring and Liaison Team which is training in Kabul and will deploy to Kunduz. Close to 500 Belgian soldiers in total are in Afghanistan out of 1200 deployed worldwide. Belgium has also deployed troops to Kosovo, Lebanon, Chad (for Darfur refugees), and the DRC. Belgium has provided close to \$40 million in development assistance to Afghanistan since 2003, via contributions to international organizations.

¶3. (C) Africa: Belgium's relations with the DRC are back on track after a difficult year resulting from De Gucht's criticism of DRC corruption and mismanagement. The Belgians are critical of recent DRC-Rwanda-Uganda coordinated military action against rebel groups in eastern DRC because of the atrocities the rebel groups carried out as a result. Acting Africa Assistant Secretary Carter met last week with Belgian MFA officials and discussed the DRC, Sudan and Somalia. The Belgians are concerned about illicit mineral exports from central Africa, which help provide resources for rebel groups. Belgium has provided troops to an EU force in Chad to protect refugees from Darfur, and is sending a frigate to assist in anti-piracy efforts off the coast of Somalia.

¶4. (C) Counter-terrorism: U.S. intelligence and law enforcement agencies enjoy a close working relationship with Belgium. This cooperation contributed to the arrest in December 2008 of a group of Belgian terrorists who had traveled to the Pakistan/Afghanistan border region and returned to Belgium, possibly to carry out attacks in Europe. Belgian courts are currently considering a U.S. request to

extradite convicted terrorist Nizar Trabelsi, who is incarcerated here for planning attacks on U.S. forces at Kleine-Brogel air base in Belgium and the U.S. Embassy in Paris

¶5. (C) Broader Middle East: There were major public protests in Brussels against the scale of recent Israeli military action in Gaza. Belgium airlifted to Brussels for medical treatment Palestinian children burned in the fighting. At the beginning of February, De Gucht led an effort to ban Belgian exports of arms to "Israel and the occupied territories." He is likely to seek your assessment of the Middle East and Iran. He believes Iran has the potential to play a constructive role on Afghanistan, but doubts that Iran will relinquish its nuclear ambitions and is skeptical that diplomacy will ultimately prove effective in dealing with Iran's nuclear program. The Belgians appeared to substantially reduce Iranian financial transactions through Belgian banks when we raised the issue last year. De Gucht focused heavily on Iran in 2007 in part because two Belgian tourists from his home town were briefly held hostage by bandits in a remote area of Iran. During its 2007-2008 tenure on the UN Security Council, Belgium chaired the Iran sanctions committee and coordinated closely with us.

¶6. (C) Guantanamo: In December, De Gucht said that Belgium would do its part to address the question of Guantanamo detainees. Ambassador Clint Williamson briefed Belgian officials on the U.S. review process on February 17, and formally asked the Belgians to accept some detainees. The Belgians are awaiting U.S.-EU discussions in Washington on this subject later this month before taking further action.

¶7. (C) Europe's East: De Gucht remains interested in issues related to Russia and Georgia--subjects in which he acquired expertise as OSCE Chairman in Office in 2006. He has voiced concern about the impact of Russia's control of much of Europe's gas supply, although Belgium itself gets very little natural gas from Russia. At De Gucht's behest, Belgium was among the first nations to recognize the independence of Kosovo.

¶8. (C) Suggested talking points include:

-- Thank De Gucht for Belgium's expanding military contributions to Afghanistan, and urge continued increases in military and development assistance.

-- Express our desire to work closely with the Belgians on Africa, especially resolving conflict in central Africa and addressing the issue of illicit mineral exports which help fuel conflicts. The U.S. and Belgium may not always have identical analyses, but we value Belgium's knowledge, expertise and contributions in the region.

-- Appreciate Belgium's close cooperation with U.S. law enforcement agencies on counter-terrorism.

-- Look forward to continued close cooperation with Belgium in international efforts to prevent nuclear proliferation, especially with regard to Iran.

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